

Priorities for the 2004 Legislature and a new year—**A SUPPLEMENT**

More information and specifics that may be of interest to you!

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Working to continue the positive momentum

Here are some interesting facts to consider when you think about our state's financial situation:

- In 2003, lawmakers closed a \$2.7 billion budget deficit without raising taxes.
- The current budget provides reserves of \$488 million.
- The state department of Labor & Industries instituted a 9.8 percent increase in workers comp rates – the second such employer-paid increase in two years.
- Washington's minimum wage increased to \$7.16 an hour this year – becoming the highest in the nation.

Last session, we effectively passed a no new tax operating budget designed to help the neediest in our communities and create a more competitive economic climate that will bring jobs to Washington. Boeing's decision to build its 7E7 here in Washington is a good sign we're on the right track. But we must continue to be fiscally responsible while we protect families and position our state for an economic recovery by balancing the operating budget without tax increases.

The Legislature should follow sound fiscal principles for a 2004 supplemental budget. The budget must ensure that the state ends this biennium, in 2005, with an operating budget that is sustainable and does not require tax increases or a reduction in core state services. The Legislature must also strengthen the state's spending limit and create a reliable, constitutional rainy day fund that will protect taxpayers against needless tax increases during economic downturns.

The Legislature should work on creating a business climate that fosters a growing economy and makes Washington more competitive for attracting and keeping family wage jobs in our communities. With signs that the U.S. economy is rebounding, it's more important than ever to position our state to participate in the economic expansion and not get left behind.

Reforms to provide jobs and prosperity for families

In order to further increase Washington's competitiveness, the Legislature must:

- Reform the workers' compensation program;
- Lift the regulatory burden; and
- Renew and extend tax incentives for high-tech Research and Development and rural communities.

There is a need for more accountability in the rule-making process by our state agencies. We must give greater consideration to the effects of agency rules on individuals, employers and their workers. State agencies should only act within the specific scope of their authority. They should be able to bear the burden of defending their rules, and the Legislature—as the state’s only law-making body—should review the rules before they go into effect. All of these items are critical to improving the public’s trust and giving local government, job providers and citizens more control.

Tax policies that help encourage investment in Washington and bring jobs to our state will go a long way toward supporting growth and more jobs. We must enable our small employers, the backbone of our economy, to create more jobs in our communities.

The lack of competition in the state-run industrial insurance system is causing great hardship on the 70 percent of Washington's employers who have no other option. We must follow on the good work started last session and continue reviewing the workers’ compensation system in Washington to find new and better ways of implementing this program.

Tort reform is one of the most critical issues we’ll address this session

We must improve our civil justice system. The cost of our nation’s tort system in 1994 was \$152 billion – the most expensive in the industrialized world. Over the past few years it has increased 125 percent, and it has grown four times faster than the U.S. economy over the past seven decades. This can’t continue, and is definitely hampering any positive economy recovery we might experience here in Washington.

Those who are truly injured are not necessarily the ones who win. One analysis shows that less than 50 cents on the dollar and less than 25 cents for actual economic loss is eventually what goes to injured claimants. We must create a fair, predictable and timely legal process.

“Liability reform,” as it’s called, will help create jobs, promote better economic times and rebuild trust. Many across Washington support it including doctors, small businesses, architects, engineers, homebuilders and nursing homes. Reasonable reforms won’t take away an injured party's right to seek legal action—but simply ask that settlements are fair and balanced.

Unfortunately, the tort system has become lottery-style justice that harms consumers, job providers and citizens. Whether we’re talking about medical malpractice insurance reform to help local doctors and hospitals simply stay in business and be there for us when we need care, or the skyrocketing insurance premiums employers, construction companies and other industries must pay to simply do business, it’s all too much.

We won’t surrender our communities to sex offenders, car thieves and drug manufacturers

It’s time to impose stronger penalties for the manufacturing of methamphetamine and put an end to this growing threat to our communities’ safety and the environment. We need to keep sex offenders out of our neighborhoods and in prison by increasing punishment for those who prey

on children, beginning with the first offense. It's also time to create a real deterrent for those who steal cars with little in the way of repercussion.

My legislative priorities to ensure public safety in 2004 include:

- Increased Penalties for First Sex Offense
- Stronger Deterrent for Auto Theft
- Crack Down on Meth Manufacturing

It seems we read more and more about sex offenders this last year in the news. The reality is more of them are in our communities. We need to keep sex offenders out of our neighborhoods by keeping them in prison. If they choose to commit such acts of aggression against women and children, they should be punished aggressively on the first offense. Many sex offenders are avoiding the requirement to register as they move around in the community. We need to make it clear to sex offenders that if we don't know where they are in the community, we will make sure we know where they are in prison.

Under current law, sex offenders are required to give basic information to the county sheriff as part of their registration requirements. Further, schools are notified by the supervising agency (Department of Social and Health Services or the Department of Corrections) when a youth sex offender will be attending their school; however, the school is prohibited from federal law to disclose this information to other students or parents. We need to allow concerned parents or students to find out if registered sex offenders are attending a certain school and who those offenders are.

We must provide for a stronger deterrent for the crime of auto theft. A family's car is typically its second greatest investment, next to its home. Unfortunately, Washington is fourth in the nation in auto thefts. This doesn't only put a significant financial burden on the victim but it affects all of our pocketbooks with higher insurance rates. In 2002, there was an attempt to address this issue and provide real punishment for all auto thieves, but to no avail. As a result, juveniles, who commit over half of all the auto thefts, still don't receive a day in detention until their fifth conviction. Adults who steal cars and can't be proven to be a part of an organized "chop shop" don't go to prison until their seventh conviction! This must change.

Methamphetamine is a toxic drug; it's highly addictive and utterly destructive to those who use it. It is very profitable to those who sell it. And it is extremely dangerous to those who come into contact with it or those who are using it. A message has to be sent to the methamphetamine cooks that this crime is serious and that the threat of punishment outweighs the financial benefits of making and selling this drug. Manufacturing meth must be made a strike under the state's "Three Strikes" law. In 1997, the Legislature passed such a measure but it was vetoed by the governor. Since that time, meth labs have soared with the Department of Ecology reporting only 202 meth labs in 1997 and 1,694 labs in 2002! We can and should make the consequence for this type of crime stronger.

Education on the forefront

The state's paramount constitutional duty is education. The students in our K-12 education system represent the hopes and dreams of our future. The teachers' strike in

Marysville is a stark reminder of everything we have at stake where our children's quality education is concerned. It lasted 49 days, making it the longest in state history.

We must strengthen our schools and provide our students with a world-class education. Consider, last year, the high school drop out rate in Washington was 32 percent, and up to 50 percent of high school students entering college require remedial education.

To accomplish this we need to consider opportunity schools, improve the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL) and ensure that we have effective teachers in every classroom by recruiting, retaining and rewarding quality teachers. It will also be important for the Legislature to clarify that teachers' strikes are illegal. This will preclude future labor disputes from taking an unnecessarily heavy toll on our children and their families.

Health care solutions at hand

As we think about our most basic needs, such as health care, here are some interesting facts to consider:

- The Washington State Medical Association (WSMA) reported a 31 percent increase in the number of its physician members moving out of state.
- Nineteen percent of WSMA members said they have stopped delivering babies and another eight percent said they planned to do the same in the near future.
- Three out of four people in Washington work for small employers, and too many of them don't have health care coverage.
- More of us are without health insurance today—in fact 11 percent of Washingtonians don't have health insurance, up from 8 percent just four years ago.
- About 75 percent of people who don't have health insurance are in working families.

Health care must be affordable and accessible. Health care costs are skyrocketing and Washington families, especially in rural areas, are losing access to health care services. Escalating medical malpractice premiums are forcing doctors to leave our communities and prompting health care providers to close their doors or limit the services they offer.

State regulations have made it too expensive for small employers to offer health insurance to workers and their families. We can make it easier for small employers to provide health insurance to hundreds of thousands of Washingtonians by creating health plan choices that small employers can afford.

The Legislature can be part of the solution to this crisis by: 1) addressing liability reforms to help control the escalating cost of medical malpractice insurance and keep good doctors in our communities and 2) passing responsible small group reforms and help working families' get reliable, affordable health insurance that cares for their real needs, right now.

Working to make state government more accessible and efficient for you

We have the opportunity to improve our lives and our communities for the better. As your state representative, elected to serve you, I'm committed to making state government more accessible and accountable to you. It should bring about positive change—not hinder your success and prosperity.

Fiscal responsibility is first and foremost in my mind as I serve you again in Olympia. As I've said before, we must continue to balance the operating budget without new taxes. In addition, we must also maintain a responsible approach to deciding what state government is in a position to do for Washingtonians. We do that by evaluating government's top priorities, examining where and how efficiently our tax dollars are currently being spent and paying for key programs with existing resources.

Your input helps me do a better job of representing you and your family. Please continue to share your thoughts, concerns and questions. With local priorities in mind, I strive to work in cooperation with fellow lawmakers to accomplish the hard tasks in front of us, including putting Washington back on track to economic prosperity, making sure families and our communities are safe, providing access to affordable health care, and maintaining quality in our schools.

Keep in touch...I'd like to hear from you

If you have questions or ideas about issues being addressed by the Legislature, I'd like to hear from you.

Because we are entering an election year, the law allows us to send you only two House-sponsored mailing between now and next November; this one at the beginning of the legislative session and another after it ends to brief you on progress made.

We can, however, continue our communication and correspond with constituents who contact us with questions or requests for information regarding specific issues. So if you have questions regarding issue addressed here or any other topics that arises as the 2004 session moves forward, just call me or contact me directly via e-mail at roach_da@leg.wa.gov and I'll be happy to respond. Also, one of the easiest ways to reach me is by clicking the FEEDBACK button on my Web page to share your thoughts, questions or comments.

Thanks and I look forward to hearing from you!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Dan Roach". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Dan" and last name "Roach" clearly distinguishable.

Rep. Dan Roach
State Representative